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SUBJECT: CHARGE HOSTS IRAQ REFUGEE DISCUSSION WITH GENEVA
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¶1. (SBU) Summary and Comment: During a lunch for key donor country reps, the Charge outlined the new US strategy for Iraq and made a pitch for additional funding, particularly for UNHCR's new proposal to lay the groundwork for sustainable returns for Iraqi refugees and internally displaced. Participants supported the US strategy and agreed with the logic of investing in returns as a means of consolidating stabilization in Iraq. They were not optimistic, however, of convincing their capitals to come up with additional funding, given limited resources and competing demands by higher-profile crises, such as Pakistan. They also bemoaned that Iraq does not seem like a high priority for the UN leadership. It seems clear that, to be successful in garnering new funding, the U.S. will have to engage at the political level with European leaders to convince them that Iraq is a US priority and that supporting returning Iraqis now is a good investment in ensuring stability in Iraq and allowing Iraqi asylees in their countries to eventually return home. We recommend also engaging with the UN leadership in support of a robust return of the UN to Iraq. End Summary and Comment.

¶2. (SBU) Charge hosted a lunch for Ambassadors and representatives from eight Geneva Permanent Missions on June 4 to discuss U.S. strategy in Iraq, including our approach to providing assistance to returning Iraqi refugees and displaced persons, and to encourage greater donor support to UNHCR's activities to meet the needs of these populations. Ambassadors from Canada, Finland, the Netherlands, and Sweden attended, as well as representatives from Denmark, France, Germany, and Japan. Also participating from the Mission's Refugee and Migration Section were Peter Mulrean and Nick Hilgert.

New U.S. Strategy For Iraqi Refugees

¶3. (SBU) The Charge noted that President Obama had just delivered his speech in Cairo reaching out to the Muslim world. An important element of his approach was for the U.S. to deal with Iraq responsibly. President Obama had launched a review of U.S. Iraq policy on his first day in office that had identified three pillars of the new Administration's Iraq strategy. These were: the removal of U.S. combat brigades from Iraq; sustained diplomacy on behalf of a more peaceful and prosperous Iraq; and a comprehensive U.S. engagement across the region. Dealing responsibly with Iraqi displaced was an important humanitarian concern, but it also was critical to supporting Iraqi stability and development. The Charge noted that an increasing number of IDPs as well as refugees are returning to their places of origin inside Iraq, and that the U.S. anticipates more Iraqi families will return

this summer, once the school year has finished. The countries represented around the table had a strong interest in supporting these trends for humanitarian reasons, for political reasons related to our overall efforts in Iraq and the broader Middle East and because support for sustainable returns in safety and dignity were the best way of reducing requests for asylum outside Iraq.

¶4. (SBU) The Charge also raised UNHCR's recent briefing to Geneva missions, during which UNHCR's Jordan Representative talked about ensuring greater "balance" between assistance provided in refugee host countries and that provided to returnees once inside Iraq. He pointed out that approximately 80% of all registered refugees originate from Baghdad itself, meaning that special effort needs to concentrate on improving the sustainability of returns in this area. The Charge clarified that the U.S. does not believe now is the time to push for large-scale return, but that it is necessary to ensure that UNHCR will be in a position to welcome voluntary returnees in a comprehensive and dignified manner.

¶5. (SBU) The Charge outlined UNHCR's new project proposal, "Facilitating the Transition from Asylum to Return and Reintegration," with a budget of \$97.5 million for the period 2009-2010. In the project UNHCR is expanding services it is already providing inside Iraq under its \$299 million CAP appeal. In addition to shelter and increased legal and protection support, UNHCR is adding cash assistance to help returnees in the transition period following their return. While it uncertain when significant returns will happen, it

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is essential to get the support mechanisms in place now. In this regard, Mulrean said it is noteworthy that for the first time in the refugee crisis UNHCR is trying to "get ahead of the curve" in responding to expected needs for future returnees. The CDA concluded by saying the U.S. will soon announce a \$20 million contribution to the new project alongside additional contributions to UNHCR's CAP. We distributed copies of the UNHCR project proposal at the end of the lunch.

New Strategy a Positive Step

¶6. (SBU) Swedish Ambassador Hans Dahlgren responded to the Charge's presentation by stating that he "could not agree more" with the focus on preparing for returns and building up the capacity to support return. He said that the government of Iraq also needs to do better than it has in this regard and questioned whether or not the UN was solidly behind this effort, or if it is mainly a UNHCR-led push. Dutch Ambassador Boudewijn Van Eenennaam agreed with Dahlgren on the strategy, but said that during his visits to Syria and Jordan in his capacity as Chair of the UNHCR Executive Committee in May 2008, he had come away with the impression that refugee returns would be limited. He said it is clear that UNHCR is the most effective UN agency in the region, pointing out that most NGOs and other international organizations are still operating out of Amman. Canadian Ambassador Marius Grinius opined that Iraq's relations with its neighbor Iran would play a big role in the future stability in the region and pointed to some encouraging signs in that regard, although many obstacles need to be cleared before the two countries can put the past conflicts behind them. He also felt that one of the caveats in the refugee return planning would be whether or not internal conflict would start up again after U.S. combat forces departed in ¶2010.

Return Question Needs a Higher Profile

¶7. (SBU) Finnish Ambassador Hannu Himanen said that, if the current stability continued, the return of Iraqi refugees and

IDPs could, in fact, be a successful undertaking and good investment of resources. Van Eenennaam agreed, adding that there is tremendous human resource capacity in the Iraqi refugee community, most notably in Jordan where the most highly educated Iraqi refugee population is found. He noted, however, that greater attention needs to be placed on making the plight of Iraqi refugees known - the "CNN effect." Financial help also needs to be concentrated on organizations like UNHCR and ICRC, though he stressed that the international community needs to have realistic expectations as to the number of refugees who will return, which he did not expect to be high for some time. Participants discussed the need for a higher UN profile on Iraq to make it clear that this is a UN priority and that the UN is prepared to return in large numbers to Iraq, rather than operating out of Amman. One idea that emerged was the value of having the Deputy Special Representative for Secretary General (DSRSG), who coordinates humanitarian issues, move his office permanently to Baghdad. The DSRSG could then organize UN Country Team coordination meetings in Baghdad, thus drawing both UN Agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) now based in Amman to Baghdad as well.

Getting Money from Capitals is Hard

18. (SBU) The Charge reiterated the U.S. commitment to maintaining strong levels of financial support to organizations working with Iraqi refugees and IDPs, and announced our imminent contribution to UNHCR's new project. He called on others to do the same. Japanese DCM Yasushi Takase, acknowledged that Japan has not contributed to UNHCR's CAP appeal in 2009, but pointed to strong, bilateral development commitments with the GOI. Peter Rasmussen, Counselor at the Danish Mission, said that the Danish Government had just authorized a three-year (2009-2011) contribution of \$24 million to support Iraqi refugees and IDPs in host countries and in Iraq. He explained later that these funds would be divided among UNHCR, UNICEF and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). Van Eenennaam pointed out that in his report from his mission to Jordan and Syria in May 2008, he concluded that UNHCR remained underfunded and said

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it would be very important to support UNHCR again this year. Grinius said that he is telling Ottawa that UNHCR is operating very well and reported that Canadian support to UNHCR this year will continue to be substantial and consistent. When pressed, however, there was not much optimism around the table of convincing their capitals to come up with significant new funds for Iraq. Participants pointed to competing humanitarian priorities; Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka are ongoing crises with high public/political profiles requiring tremendous resources and inevitably draw donor attention away from issues like Iraqi returns. While they found the logic for funding Iraq returns now compelling and claimed to be willing to make an argument to capitals in its favor, they doubted there would be much enthusiasm at home, particularly given the overall decline in humanitarian funding resources.

Comment - Raise the Profile

19. (SBU) We came away from the discussion with the clear impression that, however sound our strategy and the logic of supporting UNHCR's efforts to prepare for eventual large-scale returns in Iraq, we will not be successful in raising significant funds from other donors unless the USG raises the issue's political profile. Funding Iraq is not a priority for political leaders in Europe and they have the impression from the USG that we want their support more for Pakistan or Afghanistan. Given competing demands and limited resources, they need to hear from our political leadership that Iraq too is a high USG priority and that supporting returns of IDPs and refugees is a humanitarian/political

investment that could pay huge dividends in a fairly short period of time. It will also allow the many Iraqi asylees in Europe to eventually go home, relieving a burden on European governments. Likewise, we recommend putting pressure on UN leadership to make a robust UN return to Iraq a priority, with all of the tough security and resource decisions that implies. Without our political-level engagement, our conclusion is that UNHCR will struggle just to get donors to maintain funding for Iraq at last year's levels and the international community may miss an opportunity to get ahead of the curve on a key element in ensuring Iraq's future stability.

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